



art

# DEPTH AND DIGNITY

Chester Arnold takes an intimate look at Richard Diebenkorn

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Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993), **UNTITLED, CA. 1955-1966**  
 Ink and gouache on paper, 15 x 10 1/8 in. (38.1 x 25.7 cm), Estate no. 5571

**P**ainter and professor Chester Arnold settles into a chair at a Sonoma coffee shop, pauses to take a sip of his latte, and begins to do one of his favorite things: discuss art. Oh, and teaching.

Because on this particular late-summer morning, Arnold has agreed to talk about a subject dear to his heart and his brain, the work of late California painter Richard Diebenkorn.

Having succumbed to the effects of emphysema at his Healdsburg home in 1992, at the age of 71, Diebenkorn is currently enjoying a Renaissance of sorts, one that Arnold has ably abetted.

In addition to the gorgeous "Diebenkorn, The Berkeley Years: 1953-1966," de Young exhibit running through September 29, there is a new Diebenkorn works-on-paper exhibit opening at College of Marin, where Arnold has taught for some 25 years. And, and there are two new books on the artist, with work chosen by Arnold and his friend, the publisher Bart Schneider.



Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993)  
**Cityscape 1 (Landscape 1), 1963**  
 Oil on Canvas, San Francisco Museum of Art,  
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“Even at the end of his life, when he couldn't get out of bed, he sat in bed and made paintings because he believed in the process of renewal.”

about that idea, I floated the notion that we could probably mount a show of his works on paper, and they lit up,” Schneider says by phone from his Berkeley office. “It’s interesting, because they’re not doing a lot of that.”

Back at the café, Arnold echoes Schneider's reaction. “The foundation has been very enthusiastic and open and welcoming to us. Bart and I kept looking at each other and wondering, ‘How is it that no one has done this yet? How is it that we are the first?’ Most of it hasn't been seen or framed, so it's an opportunity for them to get some of the work out into the world and share it. I think that's their ultimate goal, to share it with the world at large.”

With complete access to all of Diebenkorn's doodles, sketches, scraps, paintings, drawings and other ephemera collected in the foundation's catalogue, Arnold and Schneider gave themselves the delightfully daunting task of choosing the images that would ultimately fill two small books. *From the Model* and *Abstractions on Paper* are the result. Priced at just \$20 each, these small full-color books slip easily into a handbag and have almost no text.

Schneider says, “I learned that people really like the intimacy of the size and I like the idea that there are no critical essays. There's nothing that interferes with the communication directly between the artist and the viewer.”

Now in their second printing, the books have flown from the de Young's counters, where they've been stacked next to the register, and are even found at the Whitney Museum's bookstore. Schneider laughs, “Sure, the Whitney's ordered it, but we'll

Perhaps California's best-known painter, Diebenkorn did his World War II service in the Marine Corps, returning to a changed nation and an electric art scene. Ruled by 20-something World War II veterans on the East Coast, the Abstract Expressionism movement had exploded, featuring dark, passionate, emotive works that drew their power not from representational forms, but from feelings.

Using the G.I. Bill, Diebenkorn enrolled at what is now known as the San Francisco Art Institute and soon entered the faculty there, teaching with fellow artists Clyfford Still, Elmer Bischoff, Hassel Smith (who briefly lived in Sebastopol) and David Park. With painters Frank Lobdell and Healdsburg's Horst Trave, these dynamic young men shaped Bay Area Abstract Expressionism as a form different from its East Coast counterpart.

“There was an independence of mind and an adventurousness of spirit here that was just different from New York,” Arnold

explains. “Here in the Bay Area, where we don't have that umbilical cord to the New York hothouse, people have always kind of done what they wanted when they wanted.”

And what Diebenkorn wanted was to create something that had never been seen before, whether representational or abstract, which explored light, geometry, carnality, color, the exultant, the mundane. And all along, he remained devoted to an academic career.

Not surprisingly, it is the educational value of the two books, and of the College of Marin exhibit that Arnold and Schneider have created, that first excited the interest of the Diebenkorn Foundation.

Schneider, a former Sonoma resident, had used Diebenkorn drawings in the past to illustrate a book of poetry published by his Kelly's Cove Press. He re-approached the foundation about a book solely devoted to the artist when he saw that the de Young exhibit was on the calendar.

“When I went in to meet with them





sell a lot more copies at Readers' Books."

Meanwhile, Arnold has been quietly working with his colleagues at the College of Marin to prepare for "The Intimate Diebenkorn: Works on Paper, 1949-1992," which opens on September 30 and runs through November 14. It will then travel to four other institutions, landing at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art in 2015.

Featuring just 40 pieces, 38 of which have never been exhibited before, the exhibit is just the smallest slice of Diebenkorn's extensive oeuvre.

"We had to eliminate so many pieces, and so many that I really felt deeply about," Arnold says. "They couldn't be loaned because they still belong to family members who don't feel comfortable loaning them. One was a piece that he did very late, a picture of a skull, which everybody on our staff loved, but the family decided at the last minute that they weren't ready to share that yet. It was a little bit darker than they felt comfortable with. That was unfortunate; it deepened his work for me."



Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993)  
**UNTITLED, CA. 1988-1992**  
 Gouache, pasted paper, graphite, and crayon on paper  
 9 1/2 x 6 3/8 in. (24.1 x 16.2 cm)  
 Estate no. 2503

"There are also a number of larger paintings and watercolors that can't be shown because the value is too high and would have pushed our insurance limit way into the red," he says, "but there are still spectacular examples of every part of his work."

The conversation soon turns to teaching. At age 61, Arnold—whose lush dystopian paintings are internationally renowned and who has exhibitions on his own calendar through 2015—is considering that it might be "an interesting experiment" to retire. Diebenkorn taught for most of his career. Arnold finds the classroom an elegant complement to time spent alone in the studio.

"If I hadn't started teaching, would I be painting so well?" he asks rhetorically. "I've found that teaching and talking about painting has given me a kind of clarity. As an artist who really believes in the whole process of painting having meaning in a perpetual way, for generations to come, I've been reflecting a lot, perhaps because of my own aging process, looking at what Diebenkorn

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ART | RICHARD DIEBENKORN

did and having the clarity of mind to keep on doing what he did.


“Basically, it was about getting up in the morning and trying to have the most dynamic adventure that he could during the course of a day. Even at the end of his life, when he couldn’t get out of bed, he sat in bed and made paintings, because he believed in the process of renewal.”

Arnold shakes his head. “That’s deeply moving and deeply encouraging. It’s a discipline, and if you don’t spend that time doing it, you’re not going to get into that zone. And it’s not that the zone produces a particular kind of work, but it does produce a particular type of depth. That’s the depth and dignity that one would always hope would be a part of who one is remembered as: as someone who really cared and who had a reverence for life and art. And to me, Diebenkorn had it in spades.”

Arnold takes a final sip of his latte.

“I’m never going to be a Diebenkorn,” he says, “because I have a much more radical and impetuous sense of humor, and am more political, but I think that there’s a lesson to be taken by everyone, no matter what their art form, in his work.

“It’s ultimately a really profound human document.”

“The Intimate Diebenkorn” exhibits at the College of Marin Fine Arts Gallery September 30 to November 14. 835 College Ave., Kentfield. Open Friday-Tuesday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., free. 415.457.8811. “Diebenkorn: The Berkeley Years” runs through September 29 at the de Young Museum, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, San Francisco. \$10-\$22, separate from museum admission. 415.750.3600. *From the Model and Abstractions on Paper* can be purchased directly from Kelly’s Cove Press, [www.kellyscovepress.com](http://www.kellyscovepress.com). 



Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993)  
**BERKELEY #44**, 1955 Oil on canvas, 59 x 64 in.  
(149.9 x 162.6 cm) Private collection [1124]  
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